E-Book

Hinduism

In a

Nut-shell



By

Tamarapu Sampath Kumaran

Preface:

The purpose of this book is to provide useful information about the world's oldest religion. Hinduism's traditions have been preserved continuously since ancient times to the present day despite the tyranny of her invaders, and it gives a pleasure to recap the Hindu heritage.

To benefit the younger generation as well foreigners to get to know about Hinduism a detailed analysis of various aspects of rites and rituals have been included. As a garland is made by gathering flowers from several plants, I have compiled this book collecting information from several texts and scholars. Since the text has been compiled from several historical and archaeological evidences some of which are debatable, I humbly state that I accept no responsibility for such references.

My indebtedness is due to all the authors whose works I have consulted and quoted. I also express my gratitude to some of the scholars at the Sanskrit college, Chennai, Kanchi Sankara Matam and the Veda Patasala, Madurantakam, for their valuable guidance in compiling this book. Since several authors have referred to the original texts, a certain degree of coincidence is likely to occur in my presentation with regard to choice of words and phrases, which is not intentional.

References have been collected from the following works:

The Story of Oriental Philosophy - By L. Adams Beck
Hinduism is mankind's oldest spiritual declaration - By Tapas K. Das
The Hindu View of Life - By Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan
A Hindu View of the World - By N. S. Rajaram
A History of Hindu Civilization during British Rule - By Pramatha Nath Bose
The Legacy of India - ed. G.T. Garratt
The Soul of India - By Amaury de Riencourt
A Survey of Hinduism - By Klaus K. Klostermaier.
Eastern Religions & Western Thought - By Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan
India's Rebirth - By Sri Aurobindo
India's Priceless Heritage - By Nani A. Palkhivala
Hinduism and Scientific Quest - By T. R. R. Iyengar
Spiritual Practices of India - By Frederic Spiegelberg
Preceptors of Advaita by Dr T.M.P. Mahadevan
Hindu Symbology and Other Essays - Swami Swahananda
Bhakti Schools of Vedanta - Swami Tapasyananda
Hindu Fasts & Festivals - Sri Swami Sivananda

I am confident that the reader will find the book interesting.

Tamarapu Sampath Kumaran

Contents:

Introduction to Hinduism

The word "Hindu" is a geographic rather than a religious term. Hindus call their religion *Sanatana Dharma* - 'Eternal law'.

This religion cannot be traced to a specific founder. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism does not promote the worship of one particular deity and does not have only one "holy book" as a spiritual guide. Hinduism differs from Christianity, Islam and other Western religions in that; it does not have a single founder, a specific theological system, a single system of morality, or a central religious organization. Hinduism is referred to as Sanathana Dharma, the eternal faith. It is based on the practice of Dharma, the code of life. The most important aspect of Hinduism is being truthful to oneself. Hinduism has no monopoly on ideas. It is open to all. Hindus believe in one God (not a personal one) expressed in different forms. For them, God is timeless and formless entity. Hinduism is a religion of the individual, for the individual and by the individual with its roots in the Vedas and the Bhagavad-Gita. It is all about an individual approaching a personal God in an individual way according to his temperament and inner evolution.

It has been pointed out by Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee, in "A Study of History", that the principal civilisations of the world lay different degrees of emphasis on specific lines of activity. Indian civilisation, on the other hand, shows an equally manifest tendency towards a predominantly religious outlook. Dr. Toynbee's remark sums up what has been observed by many other scholars. Indeed, the study of Hinduism has to be, in a large measure, a study of the general Hindu outlook on life.

Hinduism is among the oldest of the world's faiths. It is a total way of life. It is a dharma or a way of life evolved by the great sages and seers of ancient India. The early phase of the Vedic tradition in India is dated between 10,000 - 7,000 BCE, and in spite of the fact that it first evolved more than 5,000 years ago, Hinduism -Sanatana Dharma- continues to be much a living tradition. Hinduism does not recognize an intermediary or a prophet as standing between man and God.

The word Hindu is derived from the ancient *Persians* who called people living on the other side of the river *Indus* (then called Sindhu in Sanskrit) and called them Sindhus, and the word *Sindhu* became *Hindu* and the people living in India came to be known as *Hindus.*

Hinduism with more than a billion followers is the world's third largest religion. Hinduism is a conglomeration of religious, philosophical, and cultural ideas and practices that originated in India, characterized by the belief in reincarnation. Hinduism is of multiple manifestations, the law of cause and effect, following the path of righteousness and the desire for liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. Hinduism cannot be neatly slotted into any particular belief system. Unlike other religions, Hinduism is a way of life, a Dharma, that is, the law that governs all action. It has its own beliefs, traditions, advanced system of ethics, meaningful rituals, philosophy and theology. Hinduism believes that there is only one supreme absolute called "Brahman". However, it does not advocate the worship of any one particular deity. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism amount to thousands, all representing the many aspects of Brahman. Therefore, this faith is characterized by the multiplicity of deities. The most fundamental of Hindu deities is the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - creator, preserver and destroyer respectively. Hindus also worship spirits, trees, animals and even planets.

According to Dr S Radhakrishnan, philosopher, and former president of India, "in Hinduism, religious propaganda is discouraged and frowned upon, for Truth (God) does not need trumpeting."

Hinduism, believes that the soul continues its journey with a heavy load of Karmas, (good or bad) until it exhausts all Karmas by undergoing pain or pleasure sensations in the body. Then the individual soul will merge with the Absolute Soul or infinite power. This merging process is known as *Salvation*.

According to Sri Aurobindo "The inner principles of Hinduism, the most tolerant and receptive of religious systems, is not sharply exclusive like the religious spirit of Christianity or Islam. Europe where men have constantly fought killed, burned,

tortured, imprisoned, and persecuted in every way imaginable, by human stupidity and cruelty for the sake of dogma. Hinduism is in the first place a non-dogmatic inclusive religion, and would have taken even Islam and Christianity into itself, if they had tolerated the process."

Prof. Bhagwan S.Gidwani, in his book "The Return of the Aryans", comments that "We have inherited an ancient culture. It has faced many waves of invasions, among others, from the Greek, Persian, Pathan, Mongol, French, Dutch and the English. Often with savagery they attempted to suppress our culture; yet the flame of hope burnt brightly against the dark background of foreign rule".

Hinduism pays respects to all religions, and does not revile any other religions. It accepts and honors truth, wherever it may come from and whatever garb it may put on. Secularism is inherent in Hindu ethos since Hindu philosophy believed that all faiths lead to God just as all rivers lead to the Sea.

Brahman:

According to Hindu beliefs, Brahman is the principle source of the universe. This divine intelligence exists in all beings. Thus all the Hindu gods and goddesses are manifestations of the one Brahman. Hinduism is based on the concept of reincarnation, in which all living beings, from plants to gods, live in a cycle of living and dying.

Brahman is the concept of the supreme spirit found in Hinduism. Brahman is the unchanging, infinite, immanent, and transcendent reality which is the Divine ground of all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything beyond in this Universe. The word "Brahman" is derived from the verb "brh" (in Sanskrit to grow), and connotes greatness.

This Supreme Cosmic Spirit or Absolute Reality called Brahman is said to be eternal, genderless, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, and ultimately indescribable in human language. It can be at best described as infinite Being, infinite Consciousness and infinite Bliss. Brahman is regarded as the source and essence of the material universe. It is the "world soul" which also can take many forms or manifestations of the thousands of gods.

Vedas:



The contents of the Vedas are believed to have revealed by the Supreme Being to the Rishis during their meditation. Some of the vedic Rishis, such as Vasishtha, Viswamitra, Atri, Parasara, Kanwa, and Madhucchanda figure so often in mythology, legends and old stories that we are familiar with their names. Besides, most Indian families trace their origins to these Rishis. So, our association with the authors of the Vedas is deep-rooted.The Rishis of the Vedas believed that man had, besides his body and mind, an inmost self or soul, the 'atman'. To discover that self means to know one self truly. A man became a Rishi, a seer, only when he knew himself available to others to help them to achieve this knowledge. The Rishi would instruct the few students seated on the ground about him by rote and for many hours daily they would repeat verse of the Vedas.The Vedas do not preach any religion or dogma. They are the records of the inner experiences of the Rishis. However, the experiences are not described as we would describe our experience of, say, a journey to a remote land or an expedition to a mountain. What the Rishis realized in their meditations was too profound to be expressed in the usual way. So. They used what is known as 'symbolic language'. That is to say, words used in the Vedas have a deeper meaning than is obvious. Here are two examples: "Usha" means dawn. But in the Vedas the word means the Goddess who brings divine light into man's clouded mind. Or take the word 'Agni' which means fire. In the Vedic sense, it means not only fire-the devourer and the purifier-but also energy, will and the force that drives one on towards truth.

The Vedas are a corpus of ancient Indo-Aryan religious literature associated with the Vedic civilisation and are considered by adherents of Hinduism to be revealed knowledge. Many Hindus believe that the Vedas were not written by anyone (including God), but are eternally existing (apaurusheya). While many historians regard the Vedas as some of the oldest surviving texts, they estimate them to have been written down between 1500 and 500 BCE.

The Vedas consist of several kinds of texts, all of which date back to ancient times. The core is formed by the Mantras which represent hymns, prayers, incantations, magic and ritual formulas, charms etc. The hymns and prayers are addressed to a pantheon of gods (and a few goddesses), important members of which are Rudra, Varuna, Indra, Agni, etc. The mantras are supplemented by texts regarding the sacrificial rituals in which these mantras are used as well as texts exploring the philosophical aspects of the ritual tradition, narratives etc.

The Vedas are the ancient scriptures or revelation - "Shruti", of the Hindu teachings. They manifest the Divine Word in human speech. They reflect into human language the language of the Gods, the Divine powers that have created us and which rule over us.

Rg Veda was the first to be composed, containing hymns in praise of nature gods, such as *Indra, Agni* and *Varuna*, which emphasised ritualism and had little philosophic content. Subsequent compositions called *braahmana*-s and *aranyaka*-s both in verse and prose contain attempts in explaining philosophical and cosmological questions.

There are four Vedas, called the *Rg-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, and the *Atharva-Veda*, each consisting of four parts. They contain hymns in praise of various gods, prose texts on various sacrificial rites and ceremonies and philosophical texts, which clearly reveal a very high stage of, abstract thinking.

The primary portion is the mantra or hymn section - samhita. Each group has an original text (Mantra) and a commentary portion of ritualistic teachings – "Brahmana". The Brahmana again has two portions, one interpreting ritual and the other the philosophy. The portions interpreting the philosophy of the original texts constitute the Upanishads. The brahmana part gives detailed instructions regarding the performance of various prescribed karmas. Interestingly, there are also numerous stories in the brahmanas. These provide motivation for performing the karmas. They also beautifully show the meaning of the mantras and their benefits. That is why they are called arthavada. The hymn sections are the oldest. The others were added at a later date and each explains some aspect of the hymns or follows one line of interpreting them. There are also auxiliary texts called *Vedangas*, and Vedic literature refers to the whole of this vast group of literature

The Rg Veda is the oldest of the Vedas. All the other Vedas are based upon it and consist to a large degree of various hymns from it. The Rg Veda is the book of Mantra. It contains the oldest form of all the Sanskrit mantras. It is built around a science of sound which comprehends the meaning and power of each letter. Most aspects of Vedic science like the practice of yoga, meditation, mantra and Ayurveda can be found in the Rig Veda and still use many terms that come from it.

Initially the *Vedas,* perhaps the oldest written text on our planet today, were considered so sacred that they were only transmitted orally from one generation to the next for over 100,000 years. Vedas are infinite. The great *Veda Vyasa Baghavan* split them into several branches.These were then taught by him to great maharishis – seers - such as *Bailar, Vaisampayanar, Jaimini, Sumantu,* etc. Vyasa also ensured that these branches will be passed on from guru to disciple continuously, thereby making sure that Vedic learning will live for ever. There were originally a total of 1137 branches, but unfortunately, at present only a total of 13 branches are traceable. It is important to note that Vedas were to be learnt from a guru, since it is not only the words, but the pronunciation; intonation, rhythm, and metre are of utmost importance. These can only be received from a guru. In fact, for a very long time Vedas were never written down. They were always passed on orally. The passages of the *Vedas* were eventually written in Sanskrit, near the end of the third century BC.

The whole of Rg veda and most of Atharvaveda are in the form of poetry, or hymns to the deities and the elements. Samaveda is in verses that are to be sung and Yajurveda is largely in short prose passages. Both Samaveda and Yajurveda are concerned with rituals rather than philosophy - especially Yajurveda.

The Rg-Veda Samhita is the oldest significant extant Indian text. It is a collection of 1,028 Vedic Sanskrit hymns and 10,600 verses in all, organized into ten books (Sanskrit: mandalas). The hymns are dedicated to Rg vedic deities

The Yajur-Veda ("Veda of sacrificial formulas") consists of archaic prose mantras and also in part, of verses borrowed from the Rig-Veda. Its purpose was practical,

in that each mantra must accompany an action in sacrifice but, unlike the Sama-Veda, it was compiled to apply to all sacrificial rites.

The Sama-Veda is the "Veda of chants" or "Knowledge of melodies". The name of this Veda is from the Sanskrit word "*saman"* which means a metrical hymn or song of praise. It consists of 1549 stanzas, taken entirely (except 78) from the Rg-Veda

Atharvaveda means the Veda of the Wise and the Old. It is associated with the name of he ancient poet *Atharvan.*

It is also important to understand the meaning of the Vedas. *Batta Bhaskara* and *Vidyaranya* have written commentaries on the Vedas in an easy to understand style. *Kalpa* sutras give details regarding the performance of Vedic yagnas in the Sanskrit language

There is a major scriptural text called *Poorva Mimamsa*. This provides interpretations and explanations for the various *Yagnas* and other functional activities prescribed in the Vedas. It is necessary to understand these. It is also necessary to learn about the various *devatas* (deities) worshipped through these Yagnas. It is important to note that in our religion all the devatas are the bodies of *Sriman Narayna.* Therefore, in Yagnas, it is Sriman Narayana who is worshipped through the various devatas. The results of the various Yagnas are given by him through the devatas. The great *Vedanta Desika* has made it very clear that Poorva Mimamsa as well as Brahma Kanda (the Upanishads) deal with Sriman Narayana only. In the former, this is done through the devatas. In the latter the approach is direct.

We know about Dharma through Vedas. We also learn about the existence of higher worlds and about the various devatas. We also learn about *Sri Vaikunta*, the supreme abode of Sriman Narayana.

By performing Vedic yagnas, the offerings made in them become food for the devatas to whom the yagna is dedicated. Thus satisfied, the devatas give rain and good food production. The Vedas make it very clear that Yagnas are beneficial to both devatas and human beings. Therefore these acts of mutual cooperation and exchange result in satisfaction for both.

The Vedas give us Yagnas to fulfil worldly needs. If rain is needed, performance of the procedure *Kariri* is recommended. If one wants children, then *Putrakameshti* has to be performed. Similarly, there are procedures for acquiring wealth, power, cattle, etc. These gains are called *Aihika*, i.e. for here only.

Vedas prescribe procedures for *Amushmika* (here after) gains. Performance of certain Yagnas enables a person to ascend to higher worlds such as *Svarga* (Indra's heaven), after passing away from the earth and enjoy the pleasures there. These pleasures are not mixed with suffering as those on earth. However, they have their own limitations. Life in the higher worlds lasts only as long as the *punya* (merit) acquired on earth lasts. Once the punya is exhausted, one has to leave heaven and be born on earth once more.

Vedas are our real wealth. They are our eyes. They can do us more good than a thousand fathers and mothers.

Upanishad:

The Upanishads are regarded as part of the Vedas and as such form part of the Hindu scriptures. They primarily discuss philosophy, meditation, and the nature of God; they form the core spiritual thought of Vedantic Hinduism.

***Upanishad* means the inner or mystic teaching. The term Upanishad is derived from *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *s(h)ad* (to sit), i.e., *sitting down near*. Groups of pupils sit near the teacher to learn from him the secret doctrine. So, "Upanishad" means, "be seated at the feet of the Guru to receive the teaching."**

The Upanishads constitute what we call the Vedanta (Veda-anta), the end of the Vedas, not merely because they constitute the last part of them, but above all because they are their ultimate teachings, reaching to the highest metaphysical state, beyond which is the realm of Silence.

The Gita is the Upanishad of Upanishads, because Lord Krishna has drawn the milk of all the Upanishads and given it in the form of the Gita to the whole world.

The main topic of the Upanishads is the ultimate Knowledge: the identity of the Brahman and the "*jivatman*" - "*Tat tvam asi*" - You are That (Chandgogya Upanishad), the quest for unity in diversity "That by which the whole Universe is known" (Mundaka Upanishad). The Upanishads are the first scriptures where the law of Karma first appeared as taught by *Yajnavalkya* (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad).

The characteristics of the Upanishads are their universality and the total absence of any dogmatism. They are the highest philosophy ever conceived by the human mind.

Traditionally, there are 108 Upanishads (major), which are as follows:

1. **Twelve major Upanishads:**

    - ***Aitareya* and the *Kauhsitaki* which belong to *Rg Veda***
    - ***Chandogya* and *Kena* to *Sama veda***
    - ***Taittiriya, Katha, Shvetashvatara, Brhadaranyaka* and *Isha* to *Yajur Veda***
    - ***Prashna, Mundaka* and *Mandukya* to *Atharva veda.***

2. **Twenty three *samanayayuvedanta* Upanishads**
3. **Twenty *Yoga* Upanishads**
4. **Seventeen *samnyasa* Upanishads**
5. **Fourteen *vaishnava* Upanishads**
6. **Fourteen *shaiva* Upanishads**
7. **Eight *shakta* Upanishads**

According to Sri Madhvacharya, “Upanishads contain the essence of the philsophical teaching of the entire Vedic religion”.

The *Brahma Sutra*, composed by *Veda Vyaasa*, accepted as the authority for the correct interpretation of the Vedas refers to a number of well known Upanishadic texts and gives clues regarding their correct and consistent interpretation. All the different founders of Vedanta schools have started from the basic position of the infallibility of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra and have tried to justify the claims that their own conclusions are in accordance with them.

Various schools have contributed to Hindu thought, each school with a different emphasis. The school known as Vedanta has been the standard form of intellectual Hinduism. According to Vedanta, the highest aim of existence is the realization of the identity or union of the individual’s innermost self (*aatman*) with the ultimate reality. Although Vedanta states that this ultimate reality is beyond name, the word *Brahman* is used to refer to it, called Ishvara, a name best translated as “Lord.”

According to Hinduism a soul reincarnates again and again on earth till it becomes perfect and reunites with it Source. During this process the soul enters into many bodies, assumes many forms and passes through many births and deaths. This concept is summarily described in the following in the Bhagavad gita:

***"Just as a man discards worn out clothes and puts on new clothes, the soul discards worn out bodies and wears new ones."* (2.22)**

According to Hinduism a being has to live many lives and undergo many experiences before it attains perfection and becomes one with the Divine

Form of God:

Hindus have represented God in innumerable forms. Each is but a symbol that points to something beyond; and as none exhausts God's actual nature, the entire array is needed to complete the picture of God's aspects and manifestations. Nowhere else in the world do we find such a profusion of gods and goddesses, divine beings and demons, ramifications of genealogies of gods, and manifestations of the divinity in human and animal forms. But that is only the surface of Hinduism, the colorful appearance of a tradition that has enormous depths.

As the Vishnu Samhita puts it: "Without a form how can God be mediated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality."

Puja:



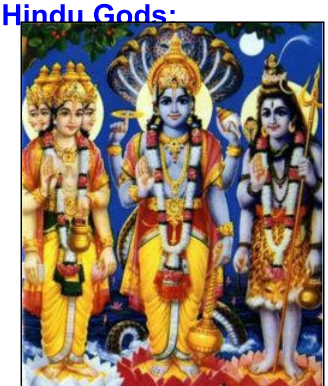
Puja is the daily ritual by which devotees seek communion with the divine. Puja symbolizes a devotee's desire to offer love and devotion to the Lord, thereby surrendering his or her individuality to Him. Hinduism recognizes self-surrender as a supreme path to salvation. Pooja when done properly guides oneself towards God, and while doing 'Prarthana' (praying), the Almighty draws closer to the devotee. Therefore it is a two way motion that brings the worshipper and the Worshipped closer.

The entire puja (worship) is a progressive identification of man and god, culminating in the meeting of eyes and the passing of the flame, the arati, which ends the ritual. The flame is passed before the image of god, and then brought to the devotees for them to pass their hands through and put them to their eyes. The god sees the face of the individual in the flame, and his power is transmitted through the flame into the person's eyes. Even a blind person goes to the temple for darshan. It is not the physical eye, as much as the inner eye, or the third eye that receives the darshan of the lord. The meeting happens in the intuitive, supersensible realm.

Ramayana, Mahabharata, Srimad Bhagavatha and Bhagavad Gita:

The two great Hindu Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* tell the story of two specific incarnations of Vishnu - as Rama and Krishna. These two works are known as *Itihasa*. The epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* serve as both religious scriptures and a rich source of philosophy and morality for a Hindu. The epics are divided into chapters and contain various short stories and moral situations, where the character takes a certain course of action in accordance with Hindu laws and codes of righteousness. The most famous of these chapters is the Bhagavad Gita (Sanskrit: *The Lord's Song*) in the Mahabharata, in which Lord Krishna explains the concepts of duty and righteousness to the hero Arjuna before the climactic battle. These stories are deeply embedded in Hindu philosophy and serve as parables and sources of devotion for Hindus. The Mahabharata is the world's longest epic in verse, running to more than 30,000 lines.

Hindu Gods:



"Trimurthi" - Brahma , Vishnu, Maheswara

Brahma **is the Lord of creation and is assisted in this process by his consort** ***Saraswathi*****, who is the possessor of ultimate knowledge. Together, they thus introduce the soul into the cycle of life;**

Brahma was born from the navel of Lord Vishnu at the end of one cycle to begin a fresh creation. He has four heads (originally five), representing the four vedas which are said to have sprung from his heads. His four heads are also said to represent the four yugas. He is bearded and his eyes are closed in meditation. He sits on a lotus and his vahana is the swan. In his four arms he holds the vedas, the kamandalam (water pot), suruva (sacrificial spoon) and a mala. (garland) He is a serene soul and is the provider of all sources of knowledge and wisdom.

There are no temples for Brahma (except the ones in Rajasthan and Orissa), and there has been no separate cult for Brahma as the Saiva or Vaishnava cult. In all Siva and Vishnu temples, generally one finds an image of Lord Brahma on the northern wall as he is considered to be one of the important Parivara devata (attendant deity).

Vishnu **is the Lord of protection, sustenance and maintenance. His consort** ***Lakshmi*** **is the possessor of wealth. Goddess Lakshmi represents not only material wealth, but the wealth of grains, courage, valour, offspring, success, luxurious life, eternal bliss. Vishnu and Lakshmi thus help the souls introduced into the life cycle by Brahma to survive in the cycle of life. Lord Vishnu is also called Nilameghashyamalan - possessing a complexion the colour of the dark clouds, bringing light and peace to the world.**

He rests on the ocean on his bed of Adisesha (serpent with 1,000 heads). It is said that at any time Lord Vishnu sees great trouble, He takes an ***avataram*** **(incarnation) to rescue, and ever rushing to serve his devotees.**

In the form of Mahavishnu he has four arms wielding the chakra, conch, lotus and the gadha or mace in his four arms. Some of the main avatarams of Vishnu are enumerated as the ***Dasavataram*** **(10 Incarnations).**

Siva **– Maheswara, the last of the Trinities is the God of destruction and he is assisted in this by his consort** ***Parvathi*****, the Goddess of disintegration. Parvathi represents sakthi, to disintegrate perishable matter, in the absence of which true and complete destruction by Siva becomes impossible. This could possibly be**

the meaning of the idea that Siva becomes nothing in the absence of *Sakthi*. Siva is generally worshipped in the form of the phallus (linga) fixed on a pedestal. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed and the Linga symbolises this scientific fact. The Linga denotes the primeval energy of the Creator. At the end of Creation all Gods find their resting place in the Linga - Brahma being absorbed into the right, Vishnu is absorbed into the left and Gayathri Devi being absorbed into the heart of the Linga.

Linga,



the emblem of Siva is the main form worshipped in Siva temples. Siva in his human form is worshipped as the *Utsava murthi*, the idol taken out on processions.

Siva resides high up on snowy mountain ranges. Image of Siva in his physical form presents him as a soothing meditative figure. His ornaments are not gold and precious stones. He wears a necklace made of skulls signifying his role as destructor. He has snakes coiling all over his body and his hair is matted and long extending over the whole sky and space. The crescent moon adorns his crown, signifying his control on the time cycle. (Amavasay – New moon and Pournami – Full moon). He smears his body with ashes and wears a tiger skin and elephant skin. He has a third eye on his forehead which is the source of knowledge and wisdom. The holy Ganges is imprisoned in his flowing locks. In his two arms he holds *the Trisulam* - the trident (the three prongs representing the three gunas of sattva, tamas and rajas) in one and *Damaru* - the drum, in the other. His *vahana* is the *Nandi*, who is also his chief disciple to whom Siva passed on all his immense knowledge in arts. The above description should convey him as an angry and destructive image, yet being the source of all knowledge he is often in a meditative pose with half closed eyes looking out into the universe as well as in to his inner self, signifying that his act of destruction is in itself an act of creation for in the absence of destruction there can be no creation.

***Dasavatharams:* are the *ten incoronations* of *Lord Vishnu.* Among them Sri Rama and Krishna are very popular and being worshipped at all places.**

Other forms of *Ishvara* widely worshiped by Hindus are *Shakti*, the female aspect of divinity.

Goddess Saraswathi

is the consort of Lord Brahma (Lord of Creation) and is the Goddess of wisdom and learning. She is considered as the personification of all knowledge - arts, sciences, crafts and all skills.

She is seen as a beautiful and elegant presence, pure white in colour, clad in a white sari, seated on a white lotus, representing purity and brilliance. She is depicted with four hands. In one hand she holds a book and in the other a rosary. With her other two hands, she is seen playing the veena. Her vahana is the swan and sometimes a peacock is shown accompanying her.

The swan is known for its exceptional characteristic of being capable of seperating out water from milk, indicating that we should possess discrimination to segregate the bad from the good.

Every year the Saraswathi Pooja (Navarathiri) is celebrated by all - schools, students, workers, craftsmen, businessmen offering their prayers for a successful and fruitful coming year.

Goddess Lakshmi

is the consort of Lord Vishnu and go hand in hand with Lord Vishnu's act of maintenance and preservation. Goddesses Lakshmi is the possessor of every form of wealth. "Sri" is considered to be a pre-vedic deity associated with fertility, water and this deity was later merged with the vedic deity of beauty, Lakshmi. Goddess Lakshmi is the source of wealth, fortune, prosperity, love and beauty. In the avatarams of Lord Vishnu, Lakshmi took various forms to accompany him - Sita with Rama, Rukmini with Krishna.

She is the possessor of great beauty and is depicted in standing as well as in the seated postures, always on a lotus. In her hands she holds two lotuses and wears a garland of lotus. She is often depicted clad in a red saree. She is accompanied by two (sometimes four) elephants on either side either garlanding her or spraying water from pitchers. She has four arms. The two upper arms are holding lotuses, while the lower arms are normally in abhaya and varada mudras. She has on her lap, a pot overflowing with gold and other riches. She is also depicted sometimes holding the amirtha kalasam (pot of ambrosia) and bilva fruit.

Ashta Lakshmis are her eight forms which are the commonly worshipped aspects. In each form, she bestows one form of wealth to her devotees. - Aadi Lakshmi, Santhana Lakshmi, Gaja Lakshmi, Dhana Lakshmi, Dhaanya Lakshmi, Vijaya Lakshmi, Veera Lakshmi , Aiswarya Lakshmi

Parvathi

is Lord Siva's consort and like Lord Siva, she is portrayed in her roudra and serene aspects. In her serene aspect, she is depicted as Uma or Parvathi and is usually seen along with Siva and also with their children Lord Ganesha and Lord Muruga. She is seen with only two hands, holding a blue lotus in her right hand.

In her terrifying aspects, the most commonly worshipped forms are Durga and Kali. These are forms taken by the Goddess in an effort to destroy some form of evil and hence even these forms need not invoke fear, for she is the mother who has risen in anger only to destroy evil forces and provide eternal happiness and peace to her children.

As Durga she is seen with four - twenty hands. She has three eyes, the third eye in her forehead. She is adorned in bright red sari. In her hands she holds the discuss, bow, trident, bow and arrow, sword, gadha, etc., Her vahana is the lion and she is sometimes seen as standing on a lotus or on a buffalo's head.

As Kali (the Goddess of Time) she presents the most terrifying aspect, usually seen in a burial or war field. She is standing on a dead body with her hair let loose and disheveled. She wears a garland of skulls.

Lord Ganesha

is the most widely worshipped Hindu God. He is worshipped at the start of any action or venture, for he is considered to be the Lord who removes obstacles (vignam) and hence is also called *Vigneshwara.* He has an elephant head, four arms. In his upper hands he holds the *paasam* (noose) and *ankusam* (spear). The lower two hands are held in the *abhaya* and *varada* mudras. Sometimes He is also seen holding his broken tusk in his right lower hand and a *modhakam* in his left lower hand. He has a huge belly and is fond of various sweets and fruits. He wears a snake as an ornament round his belly. He is depicted in seated, standing and dancing postures.

He is considered a bachelor, but according to another school of thought, he has two Sakthis (wives)- *Siddhi* and *Buddhi*. Siddhi represents success and prosperity. Buddhi represents wisdom. His *vahana* is a tiny mouse (mooshikam or munjur).

Subramanya,

popularly called Murugar, is the second son of Siva and Parvati, brother of Lord Ganesha. Murugar is worshipped widely in Southern India, especially in Tamilnadu. In fact, he is called the Tamil Kadavul (The Lord of the Tamil people). He was once upset that Lord Siva gave the sacred fruit to Ganesha and tricked him out of winning it. He is said to have left the Himalayas, the abode of Lord Siva and Parvati and settled down on a hill top in Tamilnadu in the South. Most of the Murugar temples are located on top of small hills and he is also known as the *Kundra Kadavul* (Lord who is seated on a hill, kundru - hill). He was born for the sole purpose of destroying *Sura Padman*, an *asura* (demon) who was giving immense trouble to the Devas and rishis. Murugar is said to have been created from the sparks from Lord Siva's third eye. Vayu and Agni Deva carried the sparks and dropped it in the Ganges which was carried to the *Saravana Poigai.* Six babies arose from the sparks and the six children were brought up by six women known as the *Karthigai Pengal* (pengal - women). When Parvati picked up the six children, Lord Muruga appeared as one baby. Muruga is sometimes depicted with six heads. When the time was ripe to destroy Sura Padman, Parvati gave him her

***Sakthi - Vel*. Murugar fought with Sura Padman, destroyed him. During the fight, every time his head was cut, Surapadman got a new head – a lion, a tiger, goat, etc. Murugar decided to cut him up vertically in two halves when he took the form of a tree. He is kind even to his enemies and thus took one half of the tree as his vahana in the form of a peacock and took the other half of the tree as a cock emblem in his flag.**

Hanuman,

the monkey God is considered *Chiranjeevi* (will live eternally). He is stong, full of valour, with various skills and powers. At the same time, he is wise, a great gnani, a yogi, a brahmachari. He had only one thought of serving his Lord Rama with utmost humility and devotion. He is known as *Siriya Thiruvadi*. He is considered to be an *amsam* (part) of Lord Siva

The *Navagrahas*

(including Surya) have great importance in Hindu Rituals. They are considered to play a major role in deciding the destiny of man.

All the nine grahams (planets) viz Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu (Snake's head) and Ketu (Snake's tail) give us pleasure and serenity and remove obstacles from our way. The names of the seven bodies (Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn) are still connected, in some languages, with the seven days of the week.

(*There are several other forms of Gods, which can be referred to the texts.)

Hinduism Rites and Rituals: Hindu Samskaras



Hinduism prescribes both ritual and spiritual practices for the final liberation of men. The ritual aspect is meant to make man more spiritual in the end, not vice versa. Each and every important event in the life a Hindu, who has chosen to lead a normal householder's life calls for the performance of certain rites. For the

Hindu, life is a sacred journey, and every step from birth to death is marked, and thus acknowledged, through traditional ceremony, called *Samskara.* A *samskara* is an enduring impression etched into the malleable substance of a person's mind at a psychological point in life. During these Hindu rites of passage, a temple or home ceremony deeply influences the soul and directs life along the path of dharma. There are many types of *samskaras,* from the rite prior to conception to the funeral ceremony. Each one, properly observed, empowers spiritual life, preserves religious culture and establishes bonds with inner worlds as the soul consciously accepts each succeeding discovery and duty in the order of God's creation. Religious *samskaras* serve two purposes. First, they mark clearly within our minds the occasion of an important life transition. Second, they solicit special blessings from the devas and Deities, society and village, family and friends. These blessings and feelings of love have a markedly positive effect, stabilizing the mind so that the deeper meanings of life can unfold within us.

The best rendering of *samskara* in English is made by the word "*sacrament,*" which means "religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." Sacrament also means "confirmation of some promise or oath; things of mysterious significance,sacred influence and symbol."

As quoted by Sri Raj Bai Pandey*, in his book "Hindu Samskaras"*

There are sixteen main Sacraments (Samskaras) and these make deep and positive impressions on the mind of the recipient, inform the family and community of changes in the lives of its members and secure inner-world blessings. The numerous samskaras are outlined in the *Grihya Shastras*. Most are accompanied by specific mantras from the Vedas.

- ***samskaras of birth***
- ***samskaras of childhood***
- ***samskaras of adulthood***
- ***samskaras of later life***

1. **Garbhadhan (Sacrament of Impregnation)**
2. **Punsavanam (second or third month of pregnancy)**
3. **Simantonnayana (between the fifth and eighth month of pregnancy)**
4. **Jatakarma (At the time when the child is being born)**
5. **Namakarana (Naming the child)**
6. **Niskramana (Child is brought out of house.3rd and 4th month)**
7. **Annaprashana (The first feeding of cereal at six months)**
8. **Chudakarma (First time cutting of hair, 1st year or 3rd year)**
9. **Karnavedha (Piercing the ears in the third or fifth year)**
10. **Upanayana (Investiture of Sacred Thread) From 8th year**
11. **Samavartana (When studies are completed)**
12. **Vivaha Samskara (Marriage ceremony)**
13. **Grihasthashrama (Sacraments relating to house-holders.)**
14. **Vanprasthashrama (Renouncing the house-holder's life)**

15. Sanyasashrama. (Leading the life of a monk)
16. Antyeshti (Funeral: last rites of the dead)

Castes as divided in society:

When the Aryans moved into northwest India, they imposed a caste system to organize the new society created by their arrival. They initially put together a hierarchy of four varnas (i.e., castes), which later was expanded to include a fifth category. The caste system initially served to maintain rigid social boundaries between the invaders and the previous inhabitants. Over the generations, the origins were forgotten and the system became the stratification of a single society

Pilgrimage to Holy places:

In religion and spirituality, a pilgrimage is a long journey or search of great moral significance. Sometimes, it is a journey to a sacred place or shrine of importance to a person's beliefs and faith. Tirtha yatra or pilgrimages have been an integral part of Hinduism. Pilgrimages are considered quite important by the ritualistic followers of Sanathana dharma. There are a few centers of sacredness, which are held at high esteem by the ardent devotees who dream to travel and worship God in these holy places. All these holy sites have some mythological significance attached to them. There are thousands of pilgrim sites – kshetrams – renowned for their divine images. And it is for the Darsan of these divine images as well the pilgrimage places themselves – which are believed to be the natural places where Gods have dwelled – the pilgrimage is made.

Since the number of pilgrim centers are large reference is given to some of the select centers.

Allahabad :

Lord Brahma performed the *Prakrista Yajna* here and that is how Allahabad received its ancient name Prayag. The city is located 135 km west of Varanasi , at the confluence of India 's two most important rivers - the Yamuna and Ganges . Allahabad attracts millions of pilgrims every year to the confluence of these rivers where they come to bathe and wash away their sins.

Amarnath Yatra

This wondrous Cave was chosen by Lord Shiva to narrate the secrets of immortality and creation of the universe to Goddess Parvati (his wife). In the Cave, in the Himalayas, lies the mystical Shiva Lingam which is said to have miraculous powers. The image of Shiva, in the form of a Lingam, is formed naturally of an Ice Stalagmite, which waxes and wanes with the Moon's cycle.

Badrinath

“There are several sacred shrines in heaven, on earth, and in hell; but there is no shrine like Badrinath.” – says Skanda Purana

Several venerated pilgrimage sites dot the foothills and the peaks of the Himalayas , but the most noteworthy is Badrinath. The temple of Shri Badrinathji on the banks of the Alaknanda River dates back to the vedic times. Built by the renowned 8th century. philosopher and saint, Adi Guru Shankaracharya, the temple is situated at an altitude of 3,133 meters. This is considered as one of the “108 *Vaishnavite Divya Desams*”

Gangotri

Flowing down from the Gangotri Glacier at the foothills of the Himalayas the Ganga is the holiest of all rivers. Even referred to as the Ganges, the perennial river is held in high regards by the Hindus. The Gangotri Glacier is the source of the Bhagirathi, which joins with Alaknanda (origins nearby), to form Ganga at the craggy, canyon-carved town of Devprayag

Haridwar

Referred to as Mayapur in ancient Indian scriptures, Haridwar is the most revered temples in India. Millions flock Haridwar with wishes, prayers and chants from various parts of the globe. Haridwar was the spot where the immortal nectar fell when it was carried in a Kumba after the famed churning of the oceans. And that gives all the Hindus enough reason to take a holy dip to attain salvation from their sins of birth. It is connected to Delhi.

Dwarka

This ancient sacred city on the edge of the Saurashtra peninsula was once the capital of Lord Krishna's empire. The city gets its name from the Sanskrit word ‘Dwar', which translates as “door”. You can find references of this splendid city in the Mahabharata, the Harivansha, the Bhagavata Purana, the Skanda Purana, and the Vishnu Purana

Kedarnath

It is set amidst the stunning mountainscape of the Garhwal Himalayasthe holy Kedarnath temple is at the head of the Mandakini River . Kedar is another name of lord Shiva. The lingam at Kedarnath, unlike its usual form, is pyramidal and is regarded as one of the 12 jyotirlings.

Mathura

The holy city in Uttar Pradesh is every Hindu pilgrims fancy. Known as Brajbhoomi, Mathura is the birthplace of Krishna . The city on the banks of the Yamuna River

Puri

Washed by the sea and embraced by causarina-fringed beaches, Puri is the holiest place in Orissa and one of the biggest pilgrimage centres in India situated on the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal . Here, the city's activities generally revolve around the Jagannath Temple where devotees visit from far and near. It is said that one obtains 'moksha' from the cycle of birth and rebirth, if one stays here for three days and nights.

Pushkar

It is said that while Lord Brahma was passing this spot he dropped a lotus flower. From the spots where the petals fell, water sprang out and lakes were formed. That is how Pushkar came into being.

Rishikesh

The association of five distinct sections – the town, hamlets and settlements - on both sides of the river Ganges is what makes Rishikesh.

Varanasi

Past and present, eternity and continuity are perfectly juxtaposed into the communal fabric of this wondrous city. With the Ganges freely flowing by the side, thousands of *sadhus* , pilgrims from various cultures and lots of milk, Varanasi is heaven on Earth

Vaishno Devi

Located near the town of Katra , in Udhampur district in the state of Jammu and Kashmir , the Vaishno Devi temple is one of the most revered places of worship in northern India

Tirupati

One of the famous Vaishnavite shetrams, Tirupati is the richest, the most crowded pilgrim center. There are festivals throughout the year. It makes heavy collection of offerings of Gold, Silver and currency as well a large collection of human hair, since most of the pilgrim tonsure their head as a vow to Lord balaji

Chidambaram

The southern state of Tamil Nadu is referred to as the cradle of Dravidian culture, an ancient culture distinguished by unique languages and customs. It is a bastion of Hinduism at its most vigorous, whose past endures into the present. And, the Chidambaram temple is the perfect example. Between two rivers in a 40 acre temple-complex lays the temple of Chidambaram , one of the oldest, and most magnificent temples of South India . Shiva Natraja (the Dancing Shiva) stands in his cosmic dance pose in the golden sanctum sanctorum.

Guruvayoor

Located in the Guruvayur town of Trissur district in Kerala the amazing Guruvayur Shri Krishna Temple pays homage to MahaVishnu. The 5,000 years old temple was built by the divine architect Vishwakarma and the idol is made of a rare stone known as Patala Anjana.

Sabari Mala

You will see a sudden surge of black clad, bearded men in different parts of India and these men are Sabri Mala worshippers who believe in months long of penance by sporting uniforms (a black lungi and black shirt), uncut hair and beards and walking barefoot. The Lord Ayyapa's statue is the most revered. From celebrities to the common man, everyone climbs up the treacherous trek straight upto the temple after following the 41-day penance.

Kanchipuram

The temple town of Kanchipuram , 64 kms from Chennai, was the ancient capital of the Pallavas. Famous as a city of 1000 temples, it still has 124 shrines. It's the perfect ostentation of Tamil Nadu's magnificent temple architecture. The first temple, dedicated to Shiva, was built in the 7th and 8th century and has paintings on the walls. The temples of Ekambaswara, Kailasanatha, Sri Kamakshi and Varadarajaswamy are also of interest. Kanchipuram, also called Kanjeevaram, is also famous for its silks. The city is situated around 70 km from Chennai in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Madurai

The oldest South Indian city has a lot to offer. From being the cultural centre for Tamilians to being the temple town, Madurai has many faces. But the Meenakshi temple is what attracts millions to this land of harmony. The temples gopurams , rising high above the surrounding countryside, is dedicated to Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva.

Rameshwaram

The island of Rameshwaram, spread out over 56 km of gentle sand dunes, embellished with casuarina trees and stark palms, is a sacred place for Hindus since, according to the Ramayana, this is where Rama worshipped Lord Shiva to absolve himself of the sin of killing Ravana. A dip into the sacred waters of the Agnitheertham, which was calmed by Rama, is a must for Hindus.

Holy Saints:

Every generation of Hindu society from its Vedic beginnings has produced great souls who contributed richly through their writings and speeches, and by the example of their own lives and activities inspired millions of people to attain the path to Self Realization. These are great souls, born with a purpose and still active in our earth even after their passing away, through their thoughts, memories and deeds, shaping the spiritual destiny of mankind. If Hinduism is alive and vibrant today, it is mainly because of the contributions made by these venerable souls, and we are greatly indebted to them. Their presence has sustained our faith in our religion from generation to generation.

Religion and culture are intertwined in Hinduism; this is evident from the time-honoured institution of sainthood in India which has always received acceptance and support from our society. Since the beginning of the Vedic civilization, for ages, Saintly orders of many hues and varieties have flourished in this country. Even in the present age of science and technology, sainthood survives in our land and the true saint continues to command respect in society.

An important factor almost universally accepted is that faith in a divine power shapes the destiny of mankind. Guru often traces their lineage to God. Guru helps us to achieve self-realization, to become what we really are. Spiritual liberation is the main provision that a Guru makes to the disciples. In the Hindu Tradition, Guru in addition to its common meaning of teacher also means "*heavy*" in Sanskrit. The role of the guru is therefore weighty and an important factor for a disciple.

For the majority of the people who are keen to approach God and do not posses the wherewithal to go through the texts, saints have left treasures in the form of *hymns*. Some of them are embedded with "*Mantras*", which praise the qualities of the Almighty and project how He comes to their help and protection. Daily rendering of these *Mantras* and devotional songs will fetch relief from stress and enable everyone to understand how God has provided various graded steps to realise Him. There were instances of some of these saints performing miracles mainly to convince some among the doubting persons, than to display their own divine stature. In Hinduism, the saints are the medium through whom God reveals himself. The *Avatar* is born with a mission and to accomplish the goal.

When people go to a temple, they say they go for Darsan – of the image of the presiding deity. The pinnacle act of Hindu worship is to stand in the presence of

the deity and to look upon the image so as to see and be seen by the deity and to gain the blessings.

Alwars (in pure Tamil "Azhwar") means "One who immerses himself". They really, deeply immersed themselves in their devotion and bhakti towards the Lord Sriya: Pathi Sriman Narayanan. The Azhwars are reported to be incarnations of Nithasuris of Sri Vaikuntam, namely, the weapons, the Vanamaali, the Garuda, et al. They lived like human beings and burst out bhakti laden great works for the sake of humanity. They are twelve Azhwars.

The Nayanmars: It is necessary to know of the Nayanmar saints and the Tevaram hymns before undertaking a tour of the 275 shrines glorified by the Tevaram. 63 saints who lived their lives, expressing their devotion to Shiva,

Sankaracarya

is arguably the most important philosopher in the history of advaita. Among the renowned personalities celebrated in the hagiographies of the world, by far the most distinguished for all time is Sri Sankara, reverently referred to as Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada, or simply as the Bhagavatpada. Whether considered, as tradition and the Puranas would have it, as an incarnation of Lord Siva Himself or only looked upon as a surpassing human being, either way, he is pre-eminent among the prophets and religious leaders of all times.

Sri Ramanuja

is known as the greatest exponent of Visistadvaita Vedanta. He appeared around 1017 A.D in a pious brahmana family. He became the formost Acarya in the Sri Sampradaya and was reputed to be the incarnation of Sri Laksmana, the younger brother of Lord Sri Rama.

Madhvacharya

or Anandatirtha (also Poornaprajna) is one of the three great *acharyas* of Hinduism who interpreted Hindu philosophy as revealed in ancient texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavadhita, and the Bhagavata Purana.

The other saintly philosophers are as under.

- **A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada**
- **Akhandanand**
- **Yogi Amrit Desai**
- **Ayya Vaikundar**
- **Mata Amritanandamayi**
- **Sri Anandamoyi Ma**

- **Sant Sri Asaramji Bapu**
- **Sri Aurobindo**
- **Baba Lokenath Brahmachari**
- **Bhakti Tirtha Swami**
- **Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Maharaj**
- **Bhaktivedanta Narayana**
- **Bhagawan Nityananda**
- **Bhagwan Swaminarayan Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**
- **Swami Chinmayananda**
- **Sri Chinmoy**
- **Swami Dayananda Saraswati**
- **Devamrita Swami**
- **Dharmsamrat Paramhans Swami Madhavananda**
- **Sant Dnyaneshwar**
- **Shri Madhavnath Maharaj**
- **Gurumayi Chidvilasananda**
- **Gopal Krishna Goswami**
- **Shri Harinath Maharaj**
- **Hridayananda dasa Goswami**
- **Swami Janakananda**
- **Jayadvaita Swami**
- **Jayapataka Swami**
- **Jagadguru Kripalu Ji Maharaj**
- **Sant Keshavadas**
- **Lahiri Mahasaya**
- **Madhvacharya**
- **Mahavatar Babaji**
- **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi**
- **Shri Gurudev Mahendranath Malati devi dasi**
- **Mother Meera**
- **Muktananda**
- **Dr.Narayan Dutt Shrimali also known as Paramhans Nikhileswaranand**
- **Narayana Guru**
- **Narayan Maharaj**
- **Neem Karoli Baba**
- **Nimbarka**
- **Swami Niranjanananda**
- **Nisargadatta Maharaj**
- **Osho**
- **Radhanath Swami**
- **Raghavendra Swami**
- **Swami Rama**
- **Ramakrishna Paramahamsa**
- **Ramana Maharshi**
- **Swami Ramatirtha**
- **Sri Sri Ravi Shankar**
- **Paramahamsa Sri Nithyananda Swamigal**
- **Paramahansa Yogananda**

- **Paramyogeshwar Sri Devpuriji Pramukh Swami Maharaj**
- **Sai Baba of Shirdi**
- **Sarada Devi**
- **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**
- **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami**
- **Satsvarupa dasa Goswami**
- **Satya Sai Baba**
- **Swami Satyananda**
- **Shri Shankar Maharaj**
- **Shree Maa**
- **Sri Sri Ramthakur**
- **Shriram Sharma Acharya Swami Shyam**
- **Swami Sivananda**
- **Swarupananda Tamala Krishna Goswami**
- **Swami Tejomayananda**
- **Sant Tukaram**
- **Upasni Maharaj**
- **Swami Vivekananda**
- **Swami Vedantha desikan**
- **Yogaswami**
- **Yukteswar Giri**

Hindu Customs and Traditions

Customs play a major role in the life of every person, irrespective of religious affiliations. However, this is more prominent in the case of Hindus. Right from the time of conception and birth, up to a person`s passing away and even after it, much like a shadow, rites and rituals follow a Hindu at all times. Indeed, there is one or the other rite, ritual or custom that comes into play for Hindus 365 days of the year. However, unlike other religions where many customs are mandatory, the Hindu way of life is comparatively flexible, with people in different regions following a variety of customs and traditions. While a monotonous way of life could figuratively kill many people from sheer boredom, Hindu rituals and customs enliven Hindus` daily existence. Besides, they also ensure that in the hustle and bustle of daily life in this materialistic era, people do not lose sight of spiritual goals.

All Hindu festivals have a deep spiritual import or high religious significance. All great Hindu festivals have religious, social and hygienic elements in them

Temples are the connecting points of high importance in our religion and culture. The absolute necessity of the temple worship is stressed throughout by the great saints of the religion. It is not very difficult to realize the important role they play in cultivating the spiritualism in people. It is the place for collective worship. Given these significant roles of the temples it is required to have some discipline to be followed in the temples for having the real expected out of the worship.

To attain the blessings of God, our Hindu philosophy advocates two paths, one of Bhakti (that of devotion), and the other of Gnana (that of wisdom). The path of

wisdom considers the Almighty as a concept with out any form or any feeling etc., On the other hand the path of Bhakthi considers God as One, with or without a form, but as one who incorporates many divine feelings. Prarthana in other words means prayer or worship. Worship is the first route towards pursuing the Bhakti route for Godliness. The second step is Pooja. In other words, a specific form of worship which involves an offering of a material object, or the mind, or the body, or the soul to God.

H.H. Jagadguru Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Sankaracharya Swamigal, Paramarcharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam at the Discourse during His Delhi Vijayam in 1973 defines the need to raise temples as follows: - "God exists everywhere. So, a question may be asked why there should be any temples built for Him. We know that God exists everywhere, but still the idea does not get firmly established in our mind. It does not get reflected in our daily actions. If one remembers God all the time, how can one utter any falsehood or commit evil acts?

If God is merely omnipresent, how can He help us? We all long for His grace somehow. So, we have to worship Him and get His grace. But the *agama-shastras* tell us how this should be done. The sun's rays contain a lot of heat energy. If we keep a piece of cloth in the sun, it does not catch fire by itself. But if we place a lens and focus the sun's heat rays on that piece of cloth, after some time, we find that the cloth catches fire.

Similarly, electrical energy is everywhere, but in order to bring it to our daily use, we need to have generators to channel that energy and transmission systems to distribute it at the places where we need it. In the same way, in order to get the grace of the Omnipresent Lord, we have to build temples, where we can focus the power of the Lord in a consecrated idol for our benefit in an easy way. - Temple Worship"

Hinduism is rich in symbolism. Many acts of worship, such as *puja*, are symbolic, a form of visualisation in which worshippers simulate activities normally performed on higher planes of existence. Thus the scope of symbolism is broad and includes physical acts such as offering *pranam* (obeisances) with folded hands. Such physical gestures tend to induce the appropriate mood and awareness within the practitioner. Many symbols are considered auspicious, embodying the notion of inner purity. Sacred emblems are displayed in the home or temple to invoke good fortune

Symbols and procedures:

The Purnakumbha

An earthen pot or pitcher - called 'Purnakumbha' - full of water, and with fresh mango leaves and a coconut atop it, is generally placed as the chief deity or by the side of the deity before starting a Puja. Purnakumbha literally means a 'full pitcher' (Sanskrit: 'purna' = full, 'kumbha' = pot). The pot symbolizes mother earth, the water life-giver, the leaves life and the coconut divine consciousness.

Commonly used during almost all religious rites, the pitcher also stands for goddess Lakshmi.

Om or Aum

As the cross is to Christians, the Om is to Hindus. It is made up of three Sanskrit letters, *aa*, *au* and *ma* which, when combined, make the sound *Aum* or *Om*. The most important symbol in Hinduism, it occurs in every prayer and invocation to most deities begins with it. As the symbol of piety, Om is often found at the head of letters, pendants, enshrined in every Hindu temple and family shrines.

This symbol is actually a sacred syllable representing the Brahman or the Absolute -the source of all existence. Brahman, in itself, is incomprehensible so a symbol becomes mandatory to help us realize the Unknowable. The syllable Om occurs even in English words having a similar meaning, for instance, 'omniscience', 'omnipotent', 'omnipresent'. Thus Om is also used to signify divinity and authority. Its similarity with the Latin 'M' as also to the Greek letter 'Omega' is discernable. Even the word 'Amen' used by Christians to conclude a prayer seems to be akin to Om.

Swastika symbolizes the eternal nature of the Brahman, for it points in all directions, thus representing the omnipresence of the Absolute.

The term 'Swastika' is believed to be a fusion of the two Sanskrit words 'Su' (good) and 'Asati' (to exist), which when combined means 'May Good Prevail'. Historians say Swastika could have represented a real structure and that in ancient times forts were built for defense reasons in a shape closely resembling the Swastika. For its protective power this shape began to be sanctified.

Namam and shanka chakra

The counch called pa*nchajanya* and the disc called *sudarshana* in the hands of Lord Vihnu are the important symbols of Vaishnavites

Shastras stress the importance of adorning our foreheads with Oordhva pundram or *Tiruman*. The two upward lines of Tiruman, accompanied by the *SriChoornam* in the centre, are what every Srivaishnava is supposed to wear on his forehead always. Such oordhvapundram is to be worn not only on the forehead, but at eleven other places on the body too, making around dozen.

Vibhoothi

– (cow dung ash) is smeared by the Saivites on the forehead. The Vedas say that the cow is holy and should be worshipped. It is believed that cow dung ash has medicinal value.

Kumkum

Is a powder made of turmeric and sea shell powder (calcium salts) with oil, coconut oil is used where I grew. The exact proportion of these ingredients are unknown to me.

The combination is supposed to have a cooling effect on the person wearing it. It is commonly applied over the glabellas (bhruukuti - the space between eye brows). This corresponds to the 'aaj~naadhaaraka chakra' - one of the ruling area described in praanaayaama. Anatomically this chakra is close to/ probably same as hypothalamus - center for controlling all autonomic nervous system. The person wearing Kumkum this way is supposed to be calm, patient etc. All Hindus are supposed to apply Kumkum daily. Somehow its use now, is limited to women. That too, many do not!! There is a misconception that only married women should apply Kumkum. That is not true. Girls wear them before marriage. There is no written evidence in our holy books prohibiting widows applying it.

The significance of 'Gopichandan' is again the same

It used to be a norm in every Hindu family that younger ones pay their respect to elders by touching their feet, elders blesses them 'aashirvaada'. I think this is a good physical exercise for the younger people. How else can the elders bless the younger ones?

Worshipping of Tulasi plant

is merely due to its medicinal values. Our ancestors gave it spiritual significance so that god fearing people do it. Tulasi increases the level of acetyl choline (neurotransmitter) in the body. One of the effect of tulasi is enhancing the the memory power.

Wearing bangles

in forearm is supposed to have acupuncture effect. Wearing toe ring to the second toe has sexual/erotic effect. The reflexology text do mention about treating gynecological problems by massaging the second toe. My knowledge in reflexology is limited.

Salagramam,

one kind of stone is worshipped by Vaishnavites and it is said to represent Lord Vishnu to offer prayers. The Vedha Sastras describe the three manifestations of the 'Thirumeni' of Lord Vishnu that enable the devotees to worship Him. The three manifestations are categorized as Swayam Vyaktham , Maanusham and Salagramam.These Salagramams are found in various shapes and structures. Depending upon the holes and the shapes, they are classified as Sri Lakshmi, Narasimha and Sri Varaha Murthi. Inside the saligrma Big and long hole and shining appearance. Two chakarams will be found inside the hole and lots of lines will be found.

Rudrasha

is a large evergreen broad-leaved tree that grows in the area from the Gangetic Plain to the foothills of the Himalayas. Rudraksha trees are also found in middle areas of Nepal. Rudraksha seeds are covered by an outer shell of blue color when fully ripe, and for this reason are also known as blueberry beads. 'Rudraksha' has its etymological origin in the Sanskrit words, 'Rudra' and 'Aksha'. 'Rudra' is another name for Lord Shiva, and 'aksha' means teardrop. Mythological tales have it that the Rudraksha plant was born out of Lord Shiva's tear drops. Ancient scriptures, such as 'Shiva Purana', 'Padma Purana' and 'Srimad Bhagavad' mention the greatness and wonderful powers of the Rudraksha. Saivites wear them as a way of worship..

In Hinduism, Yajna (*yajña*; also anglicized as Yagna, Yaga or Yagya) is a ritual of sacrifice more commonly practised during Vedic times. It is performed to please the Devas, or sometimes to the Supreme Spirit Brahman. It involves pouring oblations into the divine Agni (the sacrificial fire). Everything that is offered in the divine Agni is believed to reach the Devas. Yajna is performed typically with a large number of people in attendance. Yajna, where milk products (ghee or yogurt), fruits, flowers, cloth, and money are offered accompanied with sacred verses,is also termed *homa* or *havan*.

A typical Hindu marriage essentially consists of a yajna, because the fire deity Agni is supposed to be the witness of all pious marriages. Brahmins and certain other castes receive a yajnopavita at their upanayana. The yajnopavita symbolizes the right of the individual to carry out yagnas or homams.

The sanctity of dharba, also known as kusha (or, *kusa*) grass, is as old as the Indian gods. Puranas tell how Vishnu assumed the form of the Cosmic Tortoise (Skt. kurma) whose shell served to support Mandara, the mountain that served as a dasher in the Churning of the Sea of Milk. As the mountain rotated, several hairs were rubbed from the tortoise's back. With time, they washed ashore and became Kusha.

Later, when the amrita [nectar of immortality] was obtained as a result of the churning and distributed among the gods, some drops fell on the grass which further sanctified it imbuing it with healing properties. Therefore, in the traditional hair-cutting of Vaishnava toddlers, the hair is touched with kusha before it is cut.

It was used as a ritual seat as far back as the Vedas, and the *Bhagavad Gita* (ch. 6) stipulates that, covered with a skin and a cloth, it is the appropriate seat for meditation. Therefore, it was one of the first offerings made to the Budha.

Hindu Festivals (some of them have been highlighted)

Makar Sankranti - *Makar Sankranti* (also known by other various names) is the only Hindu festival which is based on the Solar calendar rather than the Lunar calendar. The festival is celebrated by taking dips in the Ganges river or any river and offering water to the Sun god.

Pongal - *Pongal* (meaning "boiling over") is a Hindu festival to give thanks for the harvest. The festival originated Tamil Nadu and spread throughout India.

Vasant Panchami - *Basant Panchami* (also called *Saraswati Puja* by Bengalis) is celebrated for the blessing of Saraswati, goddess of wisdom and

Maha Shivaratri - *Maha Shivaratri* is the great night of Shiva, followers of Shiva observe religious fasting and the offering of Bael (Bilva) leaves to the Shiva.

Holi - *Holi* or *Phagwah* is a popular spring festival.

Vasant Navratri - *Navratri* is the Hindu festival of worship and dance. In Sanskrit the term literally means "nine nights". During this festival the forms of Shakti are worshiped.

Rama Navami - *Rama Navami* is the celebration of the birth of Rama.

Gudi Padwa - *Gudi Padwa* is celebrated on the first day of the Chaitra month, and is celebrated as New Years day by Marathis. According to the Brahma Purana, this is the day on which Brahma created the world.

Ugadi - *Ugadi* (meaning "the start of an era" in Kannada) is the New Years day for the Deccans. It takes place on the same day as Gudi Padwa.[3]

Shigmo - *Shigmo* is celebrated in Goa as one of the prominent festivals of the Konkani Hindu community there.

Hanuman Jayanti - *Hanuman Jayanti* is the celebration of the birth of Hanuman; Rama's loyal devotee.

Vat Pournima - *Vat Pournima* is observed in Maharashtra. *Pournima* means "full moon." Women pray for the prosperity of their husbands by tying threads around a banyan tree.

Bonalu - *Bonalu* is a celebration of Mother Goddess, and is celebrated in Hyderabad.
Rath Yatra - *Rath Yantra* is the festival associated with Jagannath.
Guru Purnima - *Guru Purnima* is the day devotees offer puja (worship) to their Guru. This was the day when Vyasa; author of the Mahabharata was born.
Mahalakshmi Vrata - *Mahalakshmi Vrata* is a puja performed by married Hindu women to seek the blessings of Mahalakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity
Onam - *Onam* is a harvest festival, celebrated mainly in the Indian state of Kerala. Like many other religious festivals in India, Onam is celebrated by people across all castes and faiths.
Raksha Bandhan - *Raksha Bandhan* is a festival celebrated mainly in northern Indian states. Rakhi is a special occasion to celebrate the chaste bond of love between a brother and a sister.
Krishna Janmaashtami - *Krishna Janmaashtami* is the Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Krishna.
Gowri Habba - *Gowri Habba* is celebrated in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Gowri is worshipped for her ability to bestow courage to her devotees. Newly wed couples are invited to the house of the groom's parents and served with varieties of food.
Ganesh Chaturthi - *Ganesh Chaturthi* is the celebration of the birth of Ganesh.
Navratri - *Navratri* is the Hindu festival of worship and dance. In Sanskrit the term literally means "nine nights". During this festival the forms of Shakti are worshiped.
Vijayadashami - *Vijayadashami* is the Hindu celebration of good over evil.
Deepavali - *Diwali* is the abbreviation of the Sanskrit word "Deepavwali", which means "row of lights".The festival is celebrated on the occasion of Lord Krishna and his wife Satyabhama killing a demon Narakasura. Another story says the festival is celebrated for the return ofRama and Sita to the kingdom Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile.
Bhaubeej - *Bhaubeej*, also referred to as *Bhai dooj*, is the ceremony performed by Hindus, generally, on the second day of Diwali. It is celebrated among brothers and sisters and is similar to *Raksha Bandhan*, except there is no tying of *rakhi* involved.

Chhath - *Chhath* is unique to Bihar and Terai, but is also celebrated elsewhere. It is a festival dedicated to the Sun God for bestowing the bounties of life and fulfilling wishes

Prathamastam - *Prathamastami* is a festival that originated in Oriya. It is held on the eighth day of the month of Agrahayana, when older female relatives pray for the prosperity of the eldest child. The festival is followed by rituals and recitations of the Glory of Mahalakshmi.